

SUPPORT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONALISM FOR STUDENT TEACHERS IN EARLY TEACHER TRAINING

Inge Timoštšuk, Mai Normak

Tallinn University, Estonia

E-mail: inge.timostsuk@tlu.ee; mai.normak@tlu.ee

Abstract

This paper by members of the Institute of Educational Sciences of the University of Tallinn (Estonia) describes the process and reports the results of an exploration of student attitudes to professionalism using interviewing and feedback as tools. The aim of the process was to encourage the use of reflection and self-assessment by students. The objectives were:

To give students the opportunity to reflect on their understanding of the teaching profession in the modern world

To give students a better understanding of the Teacher's Standard of Professional Competence of Estonia

To give the researchers experience of feedback, e.g., how to conduct interviews and what to discuss

To identify issues that requires the attention of the university pedagogues in order to sustain and develop the quality of teaching.

The authors tested their proposal that the provision of teacher training students with feedback about their knowledge, skills and attitudes helps to develop a sense of professionalism. By assessing their performance with their supervisors, fledgling teachers can learn to measure progress according to accepted norms, both mechanistic and aspirational. The research described in this paper was done in November 2007.

Keywords: *self-assessment, feedback, teacher professionalism, professional growth, lifelong learning, diversity.*

Introduction

The role of the teacher alters with changes in society. In Estonia the person once perceived as the custodian of a single sided culture and responsible for distributing book knowledge has become an independent professional who is expected to teach pupils in a multi-cultural democracy in a multi-media environment and to support individual personal growth and development.

Teacher training in Estonia lasts for 5 years. This period encompasses a BA qualification in a specialist subject, the tuition of teaching theory and practice and (mandatory for secondary school teachers) an MA thesis. Teacher training at Masters level takes place in three stages: Pre-Service Education that provides basic pedagogical knowledge and skills, Induction Year that supports the students introduction to educational organizations and promotes the development of skills through practice and analysis and In-service Training once the student has graduated. Teachers in Estonia must complete professional in-service training courses, which are done at the university, of at least

160 academic hours every five years.

The survey we describe took place in 2007 in the context of the MA (Teacher Education) degree. Our study was of students in their very first year when they undertake teaching practice placements in a school for 4-6 weeks supervised by a qualified classroom teacher.

The teacher training degrees of the University of Tallinn are tailored to the needs of 21st century Estonian society. Teaching addresses both the subject-related needs of the school curriculum and the professional standards and ethics enshrined in the Standard of Professional Competence of Estonia (2006). The issues we address include the management of a constantly developing subject knowledge base, the acquiring of teaching skills, the inculcation of humanistic and democratic values (such as the need for civil society, respect for the individual, tolerance), the management of cultural diversity and the management of multiple personal identities (national, local, professional).

How can one say that someone is a good teacher? There are no simple answers. We know that practice and theory are essentially connected, but how? Daily co-operation with teachers, lecturers and students confirms that the idea of a good teacher varies. Even academic discussion about educational science does not provide only one answer. It is, however, possible to devise numerous supportive mechanisms that can help the teachers-to-be cope with this complex environment, to understand how their professionalism develops and how they are progressing. One of these mechanisms is to provide students with one-to-one feedback about their strengths and weaknesses during training. However, before discussing methodology we must first find answers to the questions: who is a 'professional teacher' and what is the definition of 'professionalism'?

Current issues in teacher professionalism

What it means to be a professional teacher

Edgar Krull (2002, p.25) broadly defines a 'professional' as a member of a social category recognized by other people belonging to the same category, who practice this specialty and have autonomy of action and choice. Debates around the idea of what it means to be a 'professional' seem to focus on three central issues – knowledge, autonomy and responsibility (Furlong et al. 2000, p.4). How people involved perceive a 'professional' depends on what the person knows and how independent and responsible they are.

Freidson (2001) distinguishes between three categories in the world of work: craftspeople, technicians and professionals. The distinction lies in vocational training. The majority of training for craftspeople and technicians is provided at the workplace – they do not go to universities, their teachers are not involved in scientific research, and, very often, training is not a full-time job of the trainers. Also, the trade unions that represent this area of the world of work define craft and technical jobs by skills and tasks needed and undertaken in the workplace according to custom and practice. The role of the institution in learning is minor (Freidson, 2001, p.93). This is not the case, however, for teachers whose learning at the workplace (the classroom) comprises only a small part of the whole process of learning.

The Estonian model of teacher education fits Freidson's 'professional' definition – teachers are educated in institutions (universities) that address the wider impact of social objectives by those who have received training in the same discipline and do research in the same domain.

There are considerably different approaches to 'professionalism.' Sachs (2001) presents two discourses that illustrate treatments of teacher professionalism - democratic and managerial professionalism. The first has developed from the professionals themselves and is basically collaborative and co-operative, involving both teachers and other educational stakeholders. The second discourse comes from the educational authorities and originates from a managerial need to measure productivity

Thus student teachers encounter diverse approaches to, for instance, accreditation or evaluation from supervisors, pedagogues or peers during their early teaching practice. This diversity of experience produces new knowledge, new approaches and new ways of behavior and one single outcome is unpredictable.

Robson (2006) emphasizes that there is an increasing concern about the ‘de-professionalizing’ of teaching, citing a decline in professional autonomy and the right to make one’s own decisions as a major factor. Estonia is no exception. National standards for all teaching, academic and vocational, are being used more and more and becoming ever more detailed.

The situation in Estonia, however, is different to that of the advanced capitalist countries; professional autonomy and making one’s own decisions is much easier in societies (and professional communities) where social capital is large – where common values are shared, where behavior is based on common interests, consideration of others is a respected value and there are jointly accepted ethical norms. Our democracy and capitalist society is a mere 17 years old and, unfortunately, the development of human resources and social capital in Estonia still comes second to the development of more concrete material resources when it comes to political choices. As a result, people involved in education tend to concentrate on the more manageable individual (the child as an individual learner, the teacher as an individual professional, the student as the self-directed learner etc.) rather than on group relations (e.g. the class as a learning group, teachers as a professional community, school as a sub-group of the local community) which they see as the business of the education authorities. This orientation tends to mean that official coding mechanisms such as contracts, statutes, and legislative regulation characterizes relationships, including professional relationships. This can be seen in education where new instructions and action guidelines, regulations and norms are constantly being issued by central government. Conditions of employment are closely specified in contracts and there is increasing supervision.

About the complexity of the teaching profession

Robson points out that the professional knowledge of the majority of occupations (e.g. engineers, doctors, nurses) is directly related to their field of practice. But in teaching the required knowledge is dual – the teacher has to have knowledge in the subject taught and also the knowledge of how to teach it (2006, p.14). The duality becomes more prominent the higher the level of education because the amount of basic knowledge required from the teacher grows. Knowledge of both specialist subject and teaching methodology is always necessary but there will always be debate about how much subject development teachers should do and how much time they should spend on the development of other, often less concrete, knowledge and skills. It is also obvious that teachers’ have different aptitudes. A mastery of natural sciences can be accompanied by the ability to communicate knowledge. Or not. The acquisition and usage of a complex web of professional skills must be based on the student’s sense of responsibility. We believe that a feeling of responsibility is closely connected to personal values and attitudes and, hence, to personal, professional and social identity

How political developments influence the teaching profession

Furlong and others (2000) stress the effect of political developments in contemporary education. According to them, four different groups of opinion can be identified: neo-liberal, neo-conservative, professional and technocratic-managerial-administrative. The central claim of neo-liberals is that market forces are both efficient and fair in deciding the allocation of resources and are the best way to develop an individual’s self-reliance and independence. Neo-conservatives emphasize tradition and national identity; according to them the objective of education is the preservation of a developed cultural heritage, the main question is *how* to teach and less on *what* to teach. Both neo-liberals and neo-conservatives support development of practical teaching competences and a school-based teacher training practice model. The teacher-professional emphasizes the importance of classroom teacher participation in design and day-to-day practice of all teachers training. The importance of co-operation between the university and qualified schoolteachers in planning the content of early teacher training is especially highlighted. The role of contextual knowledge is stressed where theory is put into practice. In this approach the knowledge, autonomy and responsibility of professionals are trusted. The technocratic-managerial-administrative approach gives priority to the efficacy and regulation of learning; the content

and outcomes of learning are subservient to the smooth functioning of the education process and quality is measured by external indicators (Furlong et al. 2000, p. 9-13).

The contemporary teaching profession offers an often bewildering range of issues including not only a choice of teaching styles but changes in conditions of employment, salary, the necessity for new skills (such as our development interviews!), learning outside the classroom, the changing content and role of assessment. There are many situations that presuppose different choices. Balancing these factors requires realizing one's own worth, interests and values and sense of identity

V.-R. Ruus (2005) perceives four typical roles for a teacher - public servant, salesperson, customer services officer or professional. The public servant in a democracy can foster an equitable, quality education for everyone. The salesperson can deliver a free market educational 'product' regulated by supply and demand. A customer service officer can be a client-centered teacher if a society has strong purchasing power and where the educational market is dominated by surplus. The professional teacher, however, is not, like the other three models, simply responding passively to society but participates actively, via the educational process, in its creation. The professional teacher takes responsibility for issues and problems and finds solutions - this requires intellectual effort and commitment.

This 'professional' role is, in our opinion, best suited to the current political situation in Estonia, where change is often rapid and uncoordinated. The Curriculum of teacher training (as well as that of basic and secondary schools) is prone to frequent major amendments. There are various reasons for this including external mandatory change e.g., the introduction of the EU Bologna process in higher education that aims to create a European Higher Education Area capable of matching the performance of the best performing systems in the world. These initiatives are often not thoroughly thought through. In particular, the financial and social capitals necessary to implement the changes are not considered.

So, who is a 'professional' teacher – how to recognize him/her? What is s/he like?

New notions – individualism or social cohesion?

Terhart (2004) claims that the image of the teacher requires questions such as: What is the purpose of teaching? What are the characteristics of a good teacher? What changes should a teacher address? There are many in our modern world - family models, models of youth and childhood, differences in lifestyles, and, specific to teaching, poor vocational training, acceleration in the obsolescence of knowledge and qualifications, the increasing role of information sciences, globalization in private and professional life. Many authors such as Moore (1996) avoid a detailed description of a professional teacher, they emphasize Foucault's ideas that theories, discourses, concepts, etc, do not describe reality but produce it. The problem arises with the very definition of 'a teacher' – a written model of competences starts its own fields of meaning. Even students, they say, sense a major difference between their experiences during teaching practice and a model of competence. Big contradictions can be caused by different interpretations of standards. Moore (1996) posits that a definition-centered approach directs responsibility to the individual and attention can be distracted from major issues; the descriptions of competences can be seen as a manual rather than as stimulation for ideas. This creates a danger that teaching can be seen merely as skilled labour or a craft. Goldron & Smith (1999, p. 716) posit that the result of too many detailed standards and competence requirements infers that if the teacher does not manage problem solving at the level of practical activities, s/he has failed.

A new narrative has been created for teacher training that readjusts national identity and other social groupings. According to Popkewitz (2001) a modern child is developed for democracy and choices; problem solving and readiness for lifelong learning in a learning society are stressed to address a cosmopolitan, holistic life. Such a libertarian approach gives rise to new requirements for the teacher who must be able to investigate and 'map' the individual and work in co-operation with him/her. The needs of teaching the 21c problem-solving child/parent/citizen differ from the political-philosophical and political-sociological approach to education (Popkewitz, 2001, p.181). Many traditional issues of health, psychology and education are outmoded. Instead of molding one version of an ideal member of society, education is focused on the individual personality and needs of the individual.

Are traditions relevant to teaching profession?

Goldron & Smith (1999) underline four traditional factors relevant for contemporary teachers: craft, morality, art and science. These traditions are crucial in debates about the nature of the teaching profession; is teaching, for example, a technical, scientific skill or is it an art?

According to Goldron and Smith teachers 'produce' added value through creative, artistic use of professional skills (1999, p. 718). This is very similar to the creative process of artists. The teacher's work, also like that of an artist, must, of necessity, include moral decisions – there are at least three fields where a teacher must continually employ personal value judgments.

1. Each teacher must adopt a personal attitude to professional responsibilities.
2. Each teacher has to choose whether to follow or disregard the customs and practices of their organization or institution. The choice determines if the teacher identifies himself/herself with this social group or not.
3. Each teacher must make choices in the classroom as part of teaching situations. Examples include what choices are made in illustrative materials or what is stressed in the study materials for the national curriculum (Goldron & Smith, 1999, p.718).

The supporters of scientific tradition in education, on the other hand, take the view that teaching is about using technical-rationalist methods, i.e., everything can be measured and assessed and solutions to problems can be clearly analyzed and resolved. Goldron and Smith define the scientific approach to educational questions as characterized by open and systematic enquiry. Empirical scientific research and its unpredictable results are powerful educational resources (1999, p. 720). This approach is characterized by theoretical enquiries or academic research conducted by the teacher; even the teacher's classroom experience is used to solve some specialist subject-centered issue using the pupils and employing research methods.

The work of professional teachers, however, no matter what style a teacher adopts, involves a personal rationale for one's actions. As this process takes place in an ever-changing world, it could be said that teachers are continually researching. This is the common key to professional development (Goodson, 1997).

Teacher's professional identity and conceptions of professionalism

The issue of identity as a paramount concern has, generally, emerged in Estonia due to the increase in personal liberty and civil rights associated with 'the return to the west' and the dissolution of the old social network.

According to De Benoist (2004), 'western' identity is a phenomenon that originates from the early modern period. In the 17th century the idea of freedom began to mean that each individual freely determines what is for his/her own good using reason and will. Since the notion of *We* lost its importance as society changed, the idea of *I* became more dominant. Individualism (hence also individuality) in the medieval world could be disadvantageous in life, but in modern societies certain types of individualism e.g., creativity and spontaneity, have become very highly valued.

The notion of identity, claims De Benoist (2004), was once more related to questions of independent choice but now it has connections to power and social relations. The concept of identity serves as a pivot between society and the individual and one can be talked about in terms of the other (Wenger, 1998). Van Dijk (2005, p. 92) emphasizes that members of modern Western societies belong simultaneously to numerous social groups and, hence, often have many, sometimes contradictory, identities - we could see diverse ideological beliefs and values and sometimes even a conflict of interests. Identity is not a static phenomenon. Its very essence is dynamic and changeable. Valk (2002, p.230), on the other hand, sees identity as a reliable, permanent and interconnected understanding of oneself and one's relationships. It can give stability to people in both the immediate environment as well as the wider society. It is crucial, says Valk, to develop stable relationships and trust at different levels of society – e.g., in formal and informal occupational communities. Psychologists Henriques

and Sternberg (2004) support Valk and state that an individual who has a fragmented, unstable and contradictory identity cannot act effectively.

Discussions about professional identity in rapidly changing societies are being held about many occupations. Nixon (1996), Goldron & Smith (1999) and Sachs (2001) argue that professional identity is neither straightforward nor stable. Beijaard et al (2004) contend that, in the teaching profession, there is a joint understanding that the teacher identity is an ongoing process of integration of the personal and professional. According to Goldron and Smith (1999) the identity of teachers is determined by their choices. By choosing some and rejecting other possibilities and by making distinctions, an important part of their identity is developed. This process requires vigilance because the meanings of such choices constantly change.

It is clear that one objective of early teacher training must be the development of some kind of professional identity. Our background research into the multiple choices involved in this process indicates clearly that it is a complex issue in any profession. Our research also convinced us that the process is particularly complicated for students aiming to meet the holistic model that is required by the 2006 National Teacher's Standard of Professional Competence of Estonia. Students must learn personal and professional development skills in addition to their special subject knowledge base and teaching methods.

Methodology of Research

The steps of the survey were:

1. Design of the questionnaire
2. Application of the questionnaire with students
3. Assessment of the student's answers
4. Feedback to the students and observation of feedback
5. Reflection by the students on the interview and feedback
6. Reflection by the researchers on their learning

The questionnaire was designed to explore student's attitudes to teacher identity through responses to questions about different pedagogical problems or situations. Model answers were based on the specifications of the National Teacher's Standard of Professional Competence of Estonia (2006) and the evaluation criteria for pedagogical practice of Tallinn University (2002). The theoretical background of these regulations is based broadly on modern principles of inclusiveness and sustainability in education.

The questions tried to cover as many aspects of teacher professionalism as possible and were divided into four major sections:

1. The teacher's role in society
2. The teacher's role as a manager of the learning process
3. The teacher's role as a supporter of individual growth
4. The student's role as a learner

Seven students in their first year of studies for the MA Teacher Education degree completed the questionnaire in tandem with the researchers. The students were chosen in order to be representative of different special subjects. Two students were studying to be foreign language teachers, three were studying to be science teachers and two were studying to be primary school teachers.

The researchers assessed the student's responses using (once again) the specifications of the National Teacher's Standard of Professional Competence of Estonia (2006) and the evaluation criteria for pedagogical practice of Tallinn University (2002). The purpose of assessment was to provide students with the opportunity to evaluate their potential for the job as well as to help them become aware of different roles. Readiness was evaluated on a 10-point scale (1 – complete lack of readiness, 10 – completely ready).

Feedback was conducted a week after the questionnaire was completed. There were two interviewers (the authors of this paper) and one interviewee together at one time. One interviewer commented on the answers the student had given and answered questions whilst the second interviewer observed the interview and made a record of the process. Behavior was observed in order to provide additional feedback about the student's interpersonal skills.

The interviewers used the results (i.e., grades for the answers) for assessment of this research only.

Results of Research

The authors now present the questions asked, the assumptions (based on the National Teacher's Standard of Professional Competence) that were made, the basic conclusions for each section and an overview of the complete process from the perspective of both the students and researchers.

The Teacher's role in society: Questions, Assumptions and Results

The following questions were asked about the teacher's role in society:

1. What do you think the school expects of you as a future teacher?
2. What do you think the Republic of Estonia expects of you as a future teacher?
3. What do you think the European Union expects of you as a future teacher?
4. In what way do you think the 21st century teacher differs from the 20th century teacher?
5. Which qualities and attitudes do you think are essential for a teacher?
6. There are many diverse cultures in Europe. If you have experienced this, can you give an example?
7. What multicultural situations could you, as a teacher, come across? Can you give a specific example?

Our assumptions were that the teacher has to understand his/her role in the context of school, nation and the international world. We expected the student to understand that a teacher has to be loyal to his/her school and state to be aware of the operating environment of teaching and to be aware of what this means in practical, everyday terms. Another important assumption was that a good teacher understands and considers other people's diverse interests and needs.

We concluded from the students' answers that students lacked an understanding of the deeper impact a teacher could make. The teacher was seen mainly as a transmitter of facts. The impact and role of educational policies at state and EU level was largely ignored. The importance of the teacher's social skills and attitudes were also poorly understood. Students were advised of the importance of these aspects during feedback.

Teacher's role in managing learning: Questions, Assumptions and Results

The following questions were asked about the management of learning:

1. What teaching skills do you have and what do you need to develop?
2. Can you give a specific example of how you have used your analytical, decision-making and organizational skills
3. 'Teaching is management'; please comment
4. What management skills do you have and what do you need to develop?
5. Can you give an example of planning your teaching activities?
6. It is claimed that a good teacher has a thorough knowledge of his/her subject; how can you tell if this is true?
7. How do you understand the statement 'learning occurs in a supportive environment'?
8. Teachers are expected to assess the work and development of their pupils; who do you think expects that and why?

Our assumptions were that the student considers the school syllabus and curriculum to be important and that he/she should have a thorough knowledge of the subject/s taught. Attention was paid to the ability to combine different subjects. The necessity for, and the ability to plan, a variety of action plans and timetables (and follow them) and the to deliver assessment and feedback were stressed. It was assumed that students were familiar with different approaches and types of study materials and put them to good use. Another assumption was that the students perceived the teaching environment as a whole, understanding its physical, mental and emotional dimensions.

The responses revealed that issues about delivering subject knowledge were understood best. It was more difficult for the respondents to understand the teacher's role as initiator and leader. The non-material, less concrete aspects of the teaching environment were also weakly realized.

The teacher's role and personal attitudes: Questions, Assumptions and Results

The following questions were asked about personal attitudes:

1. Which traits of your personality are most important for your teaching career?
2. What do you like most about being a teacher?
3. The teacher's role presents challenges that affect your daily life. Comment please
4. The teacher's job is complicated and affected by different situations and people. How can you maintain a balance in complex situations?
5. It is important that a teacher is trustworthy and positive. How do you demonstrate these qualities?
6. It is claimed that all children are different; where do you see these differences?
7. It is said that pupils take after their teacher. Comments, please
8. Imagine that you are working in a multicultural classroom. Do you need any special skills to manage the classroom? Please give examples.

Our assumptions were that students had a readiness to take into consideration pupils' individual abilities, needs and cultural background. Other assumptions were that the student teacher understands the importance of communication, respect for different values, the necessity for managing diversity, good organizational habits, the necessity of avoiding conflict and an awareness of his/her role as a role model for the pupils.

Our interviews revealed a wide range of perceptions. Answers to these questions were the most diverse. Some students' understandings of the teacher as an educator were multi faceted and well thought out but these were students who had a clearer vision of the teacher's impact in the education process.

Student's self awareness: Questions, Assumptions and Results

The following questions were asked to clarify how the students understood their own learning process:

1. How are your personal developmental goals related to your studies to become a teacher?
2. You intend to become a teacher. What do you have to do to achieve this goal?
3. In order to be a good teacher you need to have a clear idea of what a teacher is. To what extent do you feel you live up to this idea? In which areas do you need support?
4. How do you behave when, on your school placement, your supervisor criticizes your university teacher?

Our assumptions were that the student is, intrinsically, a self-motivated learner who sees him/herself as a member of the academic family of the university who respects academic good practice and has respect for colleagues.

The answers to this section corresponded mostly with the assumptions. Typical responses included

“I want to become a teacher – this gives me an opportunity to learn throughout all my life”

“I want to learn about many things. I am sure that I do not know yet about what I shall want to learn in the future”.

“The lecturers expect me to act like an adult. I feel that I am not a learner anymore. I must take responsibility for my own future”

Interpersonal skills

There were no actual questions about interpersonal skills, but communication skills are considered important and notes were taken during conversations about this issue. During feedback interviews it was noted whether the student could listen actively and attentively and how s/he used verbal and non-verbal language.

The interpersonal skills of the interviewees varied, but were generally found to be appropriate. Only some used slang words and sloppy pronunciation.

Overview of the feedback process from the perspective of both the interviewers and the interviewees.

Students assessed the feedback as very informative and useful. Measuring satisfaction they awarded an average of 9 points on a scale of 10 and commented that feedback provided opportunities for grounding one's opinions and ideas.

Some examples of responses:

“The idea of myself as a teacher feels strange and odd but not unacceptable. Talking about myself as a future teacher helps me to adjust to the idea”.

“The interview offered me more than I expected – later on I have found myself thinking about the questions. Again and again you remember something you had never thought of before”.

“The questions were interesting and encouraged me to reflect on them”.

Consistent interviewing and feedback is a stated aim of teacher training in Tallinn University. It is a two-way benefit. It improves the quality of communication with students, supports the development of student self-awareness and the confidence and positive image that come from this. The University, meanwhile, benefits from continual review and monitoring.

Some elements of the process described have also been used in career counseling for those students who need support in deciding whether to continue the MA studies in teacher training or in some other specialty.

Finally, we found that the interviewers gained:

1. An opportunity to practice interviewing and feedback skills
2. An opportunity to uncover pedagogical issues that need development (e.g., the teachers personal influence on modern society, multicultural situations and teacher training in the context of EU requirements)
3. A great deal of professional and personal pleasure to be able to observe that our questionnaire and feedback process encouraged students to reflect more profoundly upon the role of the teacher.

Conclusion

A major debate in the teaching profession concentrates primarily is what is a good teacher and how can teacher training be planned so that it best supports good professional development. Becoming a teacher is not a process that is easily standardized. Self-awareness can, we believe, encourage future teachers to feel a sense of commitment, help set personal developmental aims and choose learning strategies. One possible way forward is to implement activities based on personal approach e.g., the structured interview and individual feedback.

We found that work with individual students gave the students an opportunity to reflect on the different aspects and complexities of the teaching profession, on their values and on their futures and that they benefited from the opportunity to discuss these issues face to face with their supervisors.

We analyzed students attitudes to these major aspects of the teacher profession: the teacher's role in society, the teacher's role as a manager of the learning process, the teacher's role as a supporter of individual growth and the student's role as a self aware teacher in the making.

We have concluded that the results of the survey indicate that much more attention should be paid to the following issues in early teacher training:

1. The importance of a teachers role and impact on everyday life
2. The importance of the effective implementation of a range of local, national and international education policies
3. The importance of leadership and initiative in teaching
4. The importance of understanding professional values and personal commitment in teaching.

The main outcome of the research is a proven, effective methodology for supporting student teachers professional growth. The aspects we have highlighted (see above) can be addressed by implementing semi- structured interviews and feedback at an early stage in training.

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Advised by Rain Mikser,
University of Tallinn, Estonia

Inge Timoštšuk

Head of Centre of Pedagogical Practice, Tallinn University, Narva mnt 25 10129
Tallinn, Estonia.
Phone: +372 6 199 791.
E-mail: inge.timostsuk@tlu.ee
Website: <http://www.tlu.ee>

Mai Normak

Head of Department of Teacher Education, Tallinn University, Narva mnt 25 10129
Tallinn, Estonia.
Phone: +372 6 199 731.
E-mail: mai.normak@tlu.ee
Website: <http://www.tlu.ee>